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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a 1992 study that examined a group of 16 students and non-students, all paid workers at a university's food co-op. The purpose of this study was to understand more about the lives of counterculture students, their beliefs and values, and preferences and politics, specifically as those factors relate to their educational experience. While the study began as an exploration of students' perspectives, it became obvious that "student" was not easily defined. Workers in the co-op during this study were at various stages of education. Some were currently enrolled, some had dropped out for a period of time, others had dropped out permanently, and still others had graduated and chose to remain employees of the co-op. The study focused on the meaning that counterculture students and non-students find in the educational experiences they have had, and how that meaning fits within their lives. It showed that counterculture students are not especially comfortable when they are confined by the structures of a traditional college education. Some were able to navigate those expectations, others were not. Most enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of an academic environment. The food co-op in which all the respondents worked was a place that provided them some respite from the expectations of higher education and society. There they were able to play out the three significant themes of their lives: (1) education; (2) community; and (3) social responsibility. These interconnected themes are driven by values consistent with those most often associated with the U.S. counterculture. Contains 19 references. (Author/DK)

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Lee Burdette Williams

American campuses have become microcosms of the increasing diversity of our society. Different subcultures live and learn side by side in a mix of harmony, suspicion, appreciation and dislike. One particular subculture has become a fixture on many campuses, rooted in a long tradition of style, behavior, interests and values: the student counterculture.

America's counterculture can be defined as those individuals with a preference for style or behavior that rejects those values of the prevailing national culture, and specifically possess a radical political agenda that includes a non-capitalistic, anti-authoritarian worldview (Berger, 1981; Flexner, Stein & Su, 1980). Pertaining to students, this culture has been identified in various ways. In their 1960s-based research, Clark and Trow used the term "non-conformist" to describe those students who felt a strong affiliation for ideas and a weak affiliation for the institution, whose symbol was "often a distinctive style--of dress, speech, attitude--that itself represents the identity they seek" (1966, p. 23). Horowitz (1987) described collegiate "rebels," who demonstrated "repudiation of conformity and belief in youth's special ability to perceive social and aesthetic solutions to contemporary problems" (p. 94).

It was in the 1960s that this group of "rebels" effectively mobilized American campuses, calling for an end to the Vietnam War, insisting on increased student rights and challenging the bureaucracy that had left many of them feeling like little more than a student number. The late 1970s, however, showed a shift in both America and in the dominant student culture. The "me decade" was evident on campuses as students flaunted their values of wealth and individual success (Horowitz, 1987; Moffatt, 1989).

Throughout that decade, though, and into the 1990s, a strain of the original counterculture, the non-conformist student group, has remained on campus. Though they may have decreased in number and in influence, they have consistently been identified with liberal political causes such as apartheid, race relations, and environmental causes (Vellela, 1988). Some of their cooperative structures and organizations, begun in the 1960s and 1970s, have survived. Their culture is distinctive enough to be quickly recognized by administrators, faculty and other students, in large part because of the fashion choices they make. And now, as those political causes are embraced by the rest of campus, as students become more interested in community service, in politics, in environmental issues (Jordan, 1992a, 1992b), this student culture deserves a closer look.

A 1992 study examined a group of 16 students and non-students, all paid workers at a university's food co-op. The Co-op itself is independent of the university, renting space in the student union but having little else to do with the administration. As an organization, the Co-op fits the description of a countercultural structure--non-hierarchical, cooperative, radical in its politics. In fact, in Belasco's 1989 work, the food co-op as a type of organization is described as having its start as a retort to the dominance of the food industry.

At the university in this study, a large, public, mid-Atlantic institution, the Co-op is a 20-year-old business that employs approximately 25 paid workers and numerous volunteers. It grosses approximately $3500 a week, and is a well-known operation on its large campus.

The purpose of this study was to understand more about the lives of counterculture students--their beliefs and values, preferences and politics, specifically as those factors relate to their educational experience. While the study began as an exploration of *students'* perspectives, it became obvious that

student was not easily defined. Workers in the Co-op during this study were at various stages of education. Some were currently enrolled, some had stopped out for some period of time, some appeared to have dropped out permanently, and still others had graduated and chose to remain employees of the Co-op. Involving many of these individuals required expanding the definition of "student," which ultimately enriched the study. As a multi-generational group of students, respondents provided diverse and poignant perspectives on the educational experience.

THE STUDY

Sixteen paid workers at the Co-op volunteered to be interviewed as part of the study. These 16 included both students and non-students (eight were enrolled in classes at the time of the study, three had graduated within the previous three years, one had stopped out for the semester and was planning to transfer, and four had left school and did not appear to be planning a return). Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 36 years old, and all were white, the result of the Co-op's having an almost completely white staff at the time of the study.

The design of the study was based on the structures of Naturalistic Inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Naturalistic Inquiry is embedded in the tenets of the phenomenological paradigm which carry with them significant design implications. For a more detailed explanation of Naturalistic Inquiry or the phenomenological paradigm, the reader is referred to Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (1990).

In keeping with the design of Naturalistic Inquiry, the original interviews were loosely guided. Respondents were asked to describe themselves, to describe their views on their university experience, the Co-op and its place in

their lives. They were asked what kinds of things were important to them, about their families and friends and other activities. These initial interviews served in part to confirm the characterization of "counterculture." The literature on counterculture characteristics had revealed several strong traits. Some of these were rejection of authority and authoritarian structures (Clark and Trow, 1966), an intense concern for the environment (Vellela, 1988), an austere lifestyle, (Reichel, 1981), a suspicion of institutionalized power (Roszak, 1966), and a lack of life planning (Lange, 1974; Maw, 1971). These themes were redundant in respondents' descriptions of themselves, their lifestyles and their values.

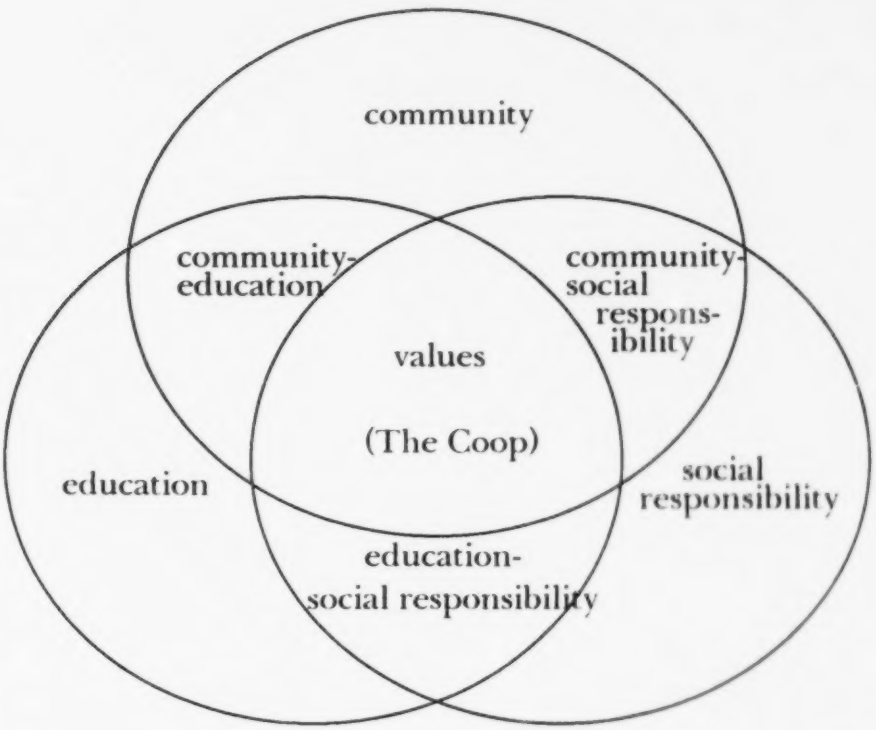
In addition to a confirmation of counterculture characteristics, these first 16 interviews brought to light several themes which were then incorporated into a more structured interview guide. Six of the respondents, chosen for their diversity of experience and perspective, were interviewed again. In addition to interviews, Co-op members were observed working and relaxing at the Co-op. They also provided their own academic papers (essays and assignments), favorite books, and preferred magazines. This allowed for "triangulation" of data collection, an important method that enhances the trustworthiness of any research (Patton, 1990).

FINDINGS

The four most notable themes that emerged from the data collected were those of community, education, social responsibility, and the importance of congruence between one's values and actions. Obviously, the setting and the original purpose contributed to those themes being reflected in the data. What was less obvious at the start of the study but became profoundly clear during it was the interconnectedness of the first three themes and the underlying importance of the fourth (see Figure 1). Unlike many college students who are

able to compartmentalize areas of their lives into study, fun, career, friends, etc., or, as Moffatt (1989) summed them up, "academic and outside-the-classroom education" (p. 54), these respondents were unable to discuss any one of these themes without discussing the others.

A Descriptive Model



Respondents' Emergent Themes

Education and Community

Education, according to respondents, is best when it occurs in a communal context, where participation is expected and rewarded. Like any good community, an educational community respects and responds to the differences in its members' abilities and interests. One respondent, a 20-year-old woman, commented,

> I find it frustrating not having many people I'm surrounded by at work and hanging out and partying who are studying the same things I am. It would be so much more exciting for me. I guess the ideal [educational] setting would have that--some more connection. This division between "school" life and "family" or "hanging out" life is somewhat depressing.

Respondents told, in varying degrees, of their frustration with the educational systems in which they had grown up. Some believed that they had been educated in spite of their formal learning, through initiative or through attention from an individual who recognized their "differentness."

Education and Social Responsibility

Respondents also tended to believe that education without a component of social responsibility is practically pointless. No matter what the subject, respondents expected there to be an aspect of instruction that delves into matters of consciousness. In some courses, this happens more easily than in others. One student, a 20-year-old woman, said that she would like to create within the educational system "a political connection to the real world, having some sort of context to relate what they're learning about to other people who are not involved in the academic setting."

Community and Social Responsibility

Community is also a place where social responsibility, specifically the interdependence of members, must be placed front and center, according to respondents. In a true community, members are expected to care for one another and for the community itself, assuming a generative mode of communication and cooperation.

Social responsibility, according to respondents, involves the appreciation of diversity and deep care for the less fortunate and for the environment, values typically espoused by the American counterculture. Other social values that were reflected in respondents' statements included several commonly associated with the counterculture: a preference for non-hierarchical structures (the lack of a supervisor was the reason most often cited for working at the Co-op), independence from bureaucracy, political activism, and critical thinking.

Congruence of Values

If education, community, and social responsibility are imagined as the components of a kite, its body, tail, and string, then values can be thought of as the wind that lifts and upholds the kite. Values such as those just listed are what appeared to drive respondents' actions in all spheres of their lives. Congruence of values, or the inability to participate in something, whether educational or recreational, that was not consistent with their values, was a central theme uncovered in the research. When respondents were forced to participate in something they could not reconcile with their personal values, they preferred to walk away from it. This could explain the large number of the Co-op's non-students, among whom were drop-outs, recent and not-so-recent graduates, and some who had never officially enrolled. Most respondents in this study were articulate and deeply reflective, and all mentioned an appreciation for the

educational climate of a university. Some, however, were more able than others to tolerate the structures imposed on them by higher education and had successfully completed, or were about to complete, their degrees. For those who had graduated but chose to remain employed at the Co-op indefinitely, it appeared that the prospect of employment in a traditional workplace was distasteful enough to tolerate the low wages and repetitive labor of the Co-op. It should be noted, though, that not a single respondent disparaged the work of the Co-op. Almost all spoke of the store and the work affectionately, and some were quite certain of the moral rightness of the work. One man in his late twenties has continued to work at the Co-op despite having earned his degree several years ago. "It's nice not having an authoritarian figure. Another good feeling is knowing that we're helping people who are trying to advance their learning. The work is not meaningless, though it has no future. Plus, we support a lot of activist stuff."

It would appear that perhaps a continuum exists. One end represents a complete unwillingness to compromise any personal value or sense of individuality to the educational process; the other end represents total, unquestioning acquiescence to that process. On that continuum, respondents would cluster toward the former end, though with enough variation in that cluster that many of them have completed or will be completing a degree. Interestingly, over half were planning careers in teaching, and several had extended their collegiate careers to become certified to teach.

The Role of the Co-op

The Co-op itself plays a crucial role in the lives of respondents. It is traditionally a place that has allowed its members to express themselves politically and personally, regardless of the pressures from the larger society, although its nature has changed in relation to that society. Those long-term

members (some respondents had been involved with the Co-op for over ten years), when asked about how the Co-op has changed, spoke of its earlier incarnation as being a campus provocateur. The Co-op was the hub of protest, a gathering place of campus radicals who would use their worktime discussing plans of action. Its current purpose appears to be different. Many respondents spoke of the Co-op as a haven from the pressures and expectations of the outside world, especially expectations of conformity. The Co-op is a place where even the oddest voice is heard, where the most outlandish lifestyle is tolerated.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the meaning these counterculture students and non-students have made of their educational experience, as well as the potential implications of that knowledge for student affairs administrators. Several implications among many, though, appear most useful for those engaged in work with students.

The first is the power of the cultural perspective in the understanding of student life. Each of these respondents has had numerous interactions with university administrators, faculty and other students. Some have been fruitful, most have been frustrating. Most of this frustration stems from a feeling of being misunderstood, of being unable to communicate that which respondents have believed or felt strongly. Kuh, Schuh and Whitt (1991) have written about the importance of recognizing the culture of a place and its people, and this certainly holds true when dealing with members of this group. If university administrators could understand the powerful cultural themes, primarily community and social responsibility, of this group, it would more likely deal effectively with members' demands for changes in the educational process, such as more flexibility in

requirements and scheduling (some respondents have benefited greatly from their time away from school). As Kuh, et al. (1991) have noted, this kind of cultural, contextual understanding is important for all student subcultures, not just the student counterculture.

Secondly, it is important for institutions of higher education to recognize the place and power of the counterculture. Horowitz (1987) has pointed out that many of America's premier intellectuals came out of the rebel culture of the past, especially those in the early part of the 20th century. It is likely that today's highly intelligent, critical and idealistic counterculture students number among themselves potential political and cultural leaders. Their experiences on campus, especially whether they receive nurturance or disdain from the university, can impact their decisions and their actions in the future. Encouraging, rather than simply tolerating, the counterculture can increase the investment of these students in the institution and can have positive benefits for the institution itself, such as word-of-mouth recruiting and increased alumni support.

A third implication relates to retention and confirms what Kuh et al. (1991) claimed in Involving Colleges: "The rationale for enabling multiple subcommunities...is sound. For students to be successful and feel valued, they must have their interests and backgrounds acknowledged, legitimated and understood, and--a longer term goal--appreciated" (p. 153). A place like the Co-op represents for those students who claim the counterculture as their own a place of validation. It is a symbol of their legitimacy. Respondents in this study often placed the Co-op and its members at the center of their university experience, leaving no doubt that such a subcommunity does relate to retention and the general overall positive experience of students.

A fourth implication is recognition of the importance of "place." The fact that the Co-op provides a physical space for such students connotes the importance of visible locations for subcommunities to congregate. This has been at the root of arguments in favor of such services as women's centers, Black student centers, residences for honors students and commuter lounges. Such places make clear the institutional support for these groups and give them a palpable presence on a campus that might otherwise be large enough to overlook them. They are also then much more recognizable to prospective group members.

Lastly, an implication of this study appears to be the need for cooperative structures on campus. Respondents admitted that part of the reason they enjoyed their work at the Co-op is that they appreciated the lack of a supervisor or designated leaders as well as the shared responsibility of managing a business that grosses over half a million dollars a year. When one looks at other student organizations, one often sees hierarchies, different levels of responsibility and the resultant difference in commitment. The question for student affairs practitioners is, "what do we do to encourage or discourage non-hierarchical structures on campus?" Such structures obviously attract certain types of students. If all student organizations are expected to have officers, if student affairs function areas are managed in narrow and hierarchical ways, then perhaps students whose preference for involvement runs counter to those signals are alientated from the institution.

Similarly, our methods of developing leaders among our students, whether in formal leadership programs or through informal contact, need to encompass a more cooperative style of leadership. Cooperative, non-hierarchical student organizations may attract and nurture a more diverse group

of students, and it is obvious that educating our student leaders to maintain such structures can only enhance their organizations.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on the meaning that counterculture students and non-students find in the educational experiences they have had, and how that meaning fits within their lives. It has shown that counterculture students are not especially comfortable when they are confined by the structures of a traditional college education. Some are able to navigate those expectations, others are not. Most, however, enjoy the intellectual stimulation of an academic environment.

The Food Co-op in which all respondents work is a place that provides them some respite from the expectations of higher education and society. It is there they are able to play out the three significant themes of their lives: education, community, and social responsibility. These interconnected themes are driven by values consistent with those most often associated with the American counterculture.

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